

## Interagency Cooperation:

# *Quo Vadis?*

**by Ted Strickler**

The Command and General Staff College Foundation at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, established the Simons Center for the Study of Interagency Cooperation in April 2010 with the help of generous financial support from Ross Perot. Mr. Perot elected to name the center after Colonel Arthur “Bull” Simons who led the 1970 Son Tay raid to free prisoners of war in Viet Nam. Colonel Simons (after his retirement from the Army) also organized and led the mission in 1979 to rescue two of Mr. Perot’s employees from a prison in Teheran.

The Simons Center’s charter mandates it to investigate, inform, and influence the full range of issues encountered throughout the process of interagency cooperation. The Center’s mission is to foster and develop a body of knowledge that will enhance the education of military and civilian students at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, as well as to contribute materially to improving the practice of interagency coordination. While recognizing the importance of national strategic policy and the necessity for interagency coordination in arriving at strategic, policy-level decisions, the Center will leave that process for others to investigate and study. We, instead, will concentrate on the conditions and factors that influence the coordination process at the practical, operational, and tactical levels of day-to-day implementation.

This first issue of the Simons Center *InterAgency Journal (IAJ)* introduces a number of themes and topics that contributors will continue to research and review in the months and years ahead. One such theme is the elusive nature of the subject itself. The practice of interagency cooperation is constantly evolving and adapting to new requirements. Methods and procedures that were seen as effective a year or two ago are less so today. For instance, most combatant commands established Joint Interagency Coordinating Groups (JIACGs) in one form or another after 9/11 with the endorsement of then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the approval, in concept, by the National Security Council Deputies Committee. These were seen initially by the Joint Staff at the Pentagon as one innovative

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solution to optimizing interagency coordination. Although the JIACG model morphed into different configurations at various military commands, the JIACG experiment remained only an improvement on the organizational margins and is now regarded by some as cumbersome and outdated. But merely chronicling the history of how interagency coordination has been carried out tells only a part of the story. It does not adequately explain why certain coordination methods and techniques were effective while others were not. The historical approach also tends to color the interagency coordination process with the overall outcome of the specific program or activity. This halo effect may obscure the fact that some operations achieved a positive outcome despite poor interagency cooperation and vice versa.

An academic pursuit of the subject of interagency cooperation equally grounded in practice as well as theory is hindered, however, by constraints of the English language itself. First is the confusion over the term “interagency”. The word “interagency” is clearly identified in the dictionary as an adjective, not a noun. Yet, increasingly, many use it as a noun in daily discourse. The problem is not with the word, but with the language which lacks a sufficiently robust vocabulary to describe fully the many actors, activities and actions involved in the process of interagency cooperation. In some cases, such as characterizing the variety and diversity of the color blue, English provides a rich selection of options (sapphire, aquamarine, teal, etc.). But when it comes to describing the intricacies of interagency activities of a cooperative nature, we have barely a handful. It, therefore, is not

surprising that the description of the players or the process of interagency cooperation, which is often not clearly evident, is frequently misrepresented. Some have attempted to overcome this linguistic limitation with the use of the term “Whole of Government” to describe what is intended by a concerted and coordinated interagency effort to apply all elements of governmental power. For the present, however, “interagency” remains the term of choice for most observers, commentators and practitioners of the process.

Second, the dearth of descriptive terminology is only one limitation of the language. The other constraining factor is the manner in which existing language unconsciously colors our thinking and hinders comprehension of the interagency process. The most frequently used words to describe interagency activity are cooperation (to operate together), coordination (to set in order) and collaboration (to labor together). Each “co” prefix implies a two-dimensional aspect to the activity as found in the terms copilot or Cartesian coordinate. The former describes a second pilot, the latter the two values required to locate a point on an X and a Y axis. Cooperation, coordination and collaboration are all words with two-dimensional histories being applied to complex, multidimensional activities. Such conjoined terminology subconsciously limits our grasp of the subject and restricts our insight into the intricacies of the world of interagency operations. To overcome this shortcoming, we need a more nuanced lexicon of interagency terminology that captures its multidimensional nature and allows commentators and practitioners to more adequately describe, analyze, and evaluate the interagency process. If we cannot fully define and describe the breadth and depth of interagency cooperation, we will never fully understand or master it.

An additional aspect of interagency coordination that complicates investigation and study is its multifaceted nature. Differing organizational structures, legal authorities, duties, responsibilities, and resource levels all play a role

in how agencies interact with each other. When roles, authorities, and resources are clearly defined and in alignment, there are fewer impediments to cooperation. When they are unclear, overlap, or diverge, cooperation may become more difficult or less effective. For example, the Department of State (State) is resourced with only about 6,000 Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) and a budget of approximately 5 percent of the Department of Defense (DoD) budget. In any situation requiring coordination with the Department of Defense, the State Department often struggles to field a corresponding level of resources to engage with DoD's 100,000-plus military officers and its budget of nearly \$700 billion. This disparity in resources limits State's ability to participate in DoD planning events, exercises, and conferences because of the limited number of available FSOs. One agreement to detail approximately 50 personnel between the two agencies, known as the State/Defense Exchange Program, limped along for years with DoD providing its full quota of officers despite State's inability to fully reciprocate. Even in terms of organizational structure, the areas of responsibility for the military's geographic combatant commands do not align with the boundaries of the State Department's geographic bureaus. Such geographic misalignment does not totally thwart coordination between the two departments, but it does not make it any easier.

Looking at interagency cooperation as a subject of academic inquiry has been primarily the domain of students at the various military war colleges. Student papers have covered the gamut of topics from overcoming interagency cultural differences to first-person accounts of interagency cooperation in combat zones. The effort by the National Defense University to develop a formal curriculum to educate and train government personnel as National Security Professionals with an emphasis on how to work in an interagency environment is notable for its ground breaking endeavor. By comparison, the civilian academic community largely has ignored

the subject, especially with regard to international operations. There are a few exceptions. George Mason University's School of Public Policy offers a program on peacekeeping and stability operations, and some universities are working to establish degree-granting programs in Homeland Security, but these programs are still rare. Recent legislation, (HR 6249) introduced by Representatives Ike Skelton (D-MO) and Geoff Davis (R-KY), to create a system to educate, train, and develop interagency national security professionals across the government may create additional interest in the subject at the nation's colleges and universities.

However, when dealt with at all, most college and university programs at the present still approach the subject of coordinated government activity from an historical or policy perspective. This approach helps to explain government actions from a theoretical policy perspective and in such conceptual terms as balance of power, containment, and the Domino Theory. It does little, however, to advance the understanding of how government agencies actually interact in practical terms to implement policy decisions, especially at the application level outside Washington, D.C. From a coordination viewpoint, instruction that highlights how the State Department, for example is organized with six geographic and over a dozen functional bureaus, has two deputy secretaries, six under secretaries, at least 30 assistant secretaries, nearly 100 deputy assistant secretaries, and approximately two dozen special envoys/representatives/advisors with their various duties and responsibilities (some of which appear to overlap) is probably more critical to the success of current interagency operations than tracing the evolution of American foreign policy from the Monroe Doctrine.

In addition to moving beyond the historical examination of interagency issues using an expanded descriptive vocabulary, there is the need for a more structured, methodical approach to the investigation, study, and analysis of interagency

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cooperation. To date, the characterization of interagency cooperation has been largely subjective and selective. For example, mainstream media's largely uncritical and favorable description of the relationship between Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus in Iraq may have minimized the operational difficulties and friction between military and civilian officials at lower levels. Describing such interagency encounters as excellent, fair, or poor may satisfy the need to affix a descriptive label, but it does little to help fully analyze, understand, and compare agency coordination efforts.

What is needed is a framework or model of the process that describes its component parts and the level of sophistication or expertise at which each individual element functions. For instance, one such element, widely recognized as a key component required for successful interagency coordination, is personal relationships. These relationships could be described in terms of depth from basic to advanced, with basic being defined as an initial exchange of business cards to advanced being characterized by regular (weekly/monthly) face-to-face meetings

Other components of the interagency coordination process eligible for consideration in such a model could be information exchange, goals, attitudes, and procedures. Information exchange or information sharing is a fundamental building block of cooperative efforts. Information sharing, for example, at a basic level has little structure, is less than comprehensive, and is usually episodic in nature. This is characterized by information usually being pulled (requested on a case-by-case basis) and not being pushed (volunteered on a regular basis). Organizations

interacting in this manner usually do so independently and at an arm's distance.

By contrast, a much more advanced level of information sharing emphasizes providing information about future events, intent, and plans as a way of synchronizing multiple efforts to achieve a common goal. This type of information sharing is characterized by open, frequent, two-way communications and is intended to provide more than mere situational awareness of what each participant is currently doing. Such information flow is also more structured and formalized, which may increase the willingness of other partners to rely on the information received as well as to share information in a similar manner and to a like extent.

Conceivably, these and other elements could be assembled in something called an Interagency Coordination Maturity matrix, with the individual elements arrayed across the top, and the various levels from basic to advanced aligned vertically in a manner illustrated in the table on page seven. The individual elements and the various levels of sophistication or complexity all remain open to further discussion and refinement. Such a model would, however, allow for a more uniform, structured, and refined approach to the description and analysis of agency interaction and attempts at coordination. For example, an instance of interagency cooperation could be characterized as being advanced on the level of personal relationships, but only at the intermediate level for information sharing.

The suggested description of each level of interagency engagement (Basic/Consultation, Elementary/Cooperation, Intermediate/Coordination, Advanced/Collaboration) is purely illustrative but is provided in recognition of the fact that it would be useful to have agreed terms of reference related to the description and discussion of interagency cooperation. If the analysis of interagency cooperation were to become more systemic, then strong, relevant terms of reference surely would emerge along the lines illustrated in the following table.

Interagency Maturity Levels	Basic Elements Contributing to Overall IA Maturity Level				
	Interagency Relationships	Information Access	Agency Goals	Agency Attitude	Interagency Process
<b>Basic</b> (Consultation)	Minimal	Restricted: Briefings confined to specific actions underway	Independent; frequently conflict	Self-absorbed	Sporadic
<b>Elementary</b> (Cooperation)	Personal	Limited: Information exchanged to deconflict operations, to stay out of each other's way	Independent but aware of others	Friends could be helpful	Unstructured
<b>Intermediate</b> (Coordination)	Organizational	Expanded: Willing to share future plans to garner mutual support	Independent but aligned with others	Friends are essential	Organized
<b>Advanced</b> (Collaboration)	Institutional	Extensive: Information flow supports full planning cycle and integrated operations	Mutual and reinforcing	Cannot do it alone	Systematic

The need for improved interagency cooperation has been a hot topic of discussion for nearly a decade. Whatever terminology is ultimately adopted to aid the analysis of the process, the essential ingredients for successful interagency coordination are widely recognized and well understood. Most people see the fundamental requirements for effective interagency cooperation as including the following categories.

**Personal Relationships.** These are the foundation of interagency cooperation. The process has to start somewhere, and it usually begins with establishing a personal relationship. But given the frequent changes of government personnel, especially in the military and civilian agencies such as the State Department, such

personal relationships are difficult to sustain and maintain over time. This, unfortunately, undermines the creation and sustainment of trust (a measure of the honesty, integrity and reliability of the relationship) which is the fundamental element that makes a strong personal relationship such a powerful asset in any interagency activity.

**Information sharing.** This is essential. But information sharing frequently masquerades as coordination, providing the illusion of coordination without the substance. In addition, information sharing is often characterized by rigid agency protocols that require information to flow to the top of individual agency stovepipes to be shared at senior levels and then reversing the process to disseminate the information downward through each agency's separate channel to get

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the information to where it is needed at the operational and tactical levels.

**Planning.** Coordinated interagency efforts require coordinated interagency planning. But civilian agency resources devoted to detailed planning are far fewer and less well developed than those of the military. This disparity often hands the military the planning responsibility by default. The military planning system, JOPES, (Joint Operational Planning and Execution System) is not without its problems in terms of planning for interagency operations. JOPES doctrine requires that all interagency aspects of a plan be captured and discussed in a separate part of the plan, Annex V. This artificially limits the discussion of interagency elements of the plan to a single annex rather than having those essential interagency activities discussed in each relevant section of the plan.

**Exercises.** Most people will acknowledge that a team which does not practice together will never win the championship. Yet when it comes to complex operations requiring multiple agency involvement, the extent and nature of the practice sessions are often very limited. And when exercises are conducted, the key civilian players are frequently surrogate, stand-ins for the real officials. Football teams would never practice without the quarterback, but it happens all the time in government exercises.

If the basic components of interagency cooperation and the essential practices necessary for their successful operation are so well understood, why is interagency cooperation so difficult to achieve? Numerous fundamental

impediments are well known, ranging from different corporate cultures, to restricted legal authorities, to divergent missions and goals. If the problem is self-evident, why is the solution so difficult? Isaac Newton discovered the answer more than 300 years ago when he postulated his First Law of Motion:

*An object at rest tends to remain at rest and an object in motion tends to remain in motion with the same speed on the same path or trajectory unless acted upon by an external force.*

Inertia or resistance to change is undoubtedly the biggest obstacle to improving interagency cooperation. Human behavior by its very nature clings to the status quo. Despite the recognition by the military services of the need for increased "jointness" in their command structure, organizational staffing, and operating capability, it took a failed rescue attempt of American hostages in Iran in 1979 to force action. Then, even with the recognition that something needed to be done, it required an additional five years for Congress to enact the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1984 which finally mandated the needed changes. There has been much speculation about the need for a similar Congressional Act to force greater integration and coordination of civilian agencies' activities. Because resistance to new ways of thinking and operating is so pervasive, change of this magnitude will not be easy or forthcoming in the near future, leaving the practitioners of interagency cooperation to deal with the situation as it is, not as it should be.

While continuing to press for a more ideal solution, we should not allow "The Perfect" to become the enemy of "The Good." As evidenced by several accounts elsewhere in this journal, improvements in the interagency coordination process have been and continue to be made, especially by those working below the strategic level outside the Washington, D.C. Beltway. The mission of the Simons Center is to publicize

those activities, innovations, and contributions that aid interagency coordination efforts now and point the way for continued improvements in the future.

Our intent for the *InterAgency Journal* is to give voice to those who demonstrate how agencies can, in fact, work better together. We intend to continue to champion the cause of improving interagency cooperation at the operational and tactical levels because that effort is so vital in achieving a more synchronized, whole-of-government response to domestic and international events.

Our goal for the *InterAgency Journal* is to further the discussion and understanding of how to replace current ad hoc interagency coordination efforts with more permanent and institutionalized arrangements that have a demonstrated track record of success. The quest for improved, streamlined, and better coordinated interagency teamwork is a vital national effort. You can help support this important cause with your ideas, comments and contributions.

We look forward to hearing from you and being able to share your experiences, insights and recommendations with the growing community of knowledgeable professionals who practice, study, or teach the art of interagency cooperation. **IAJ**

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